

I. Introduction

May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all, as we gather in spirit in His name, no matter where we are physically right now! For those who don't know me, I'm Neil Amstutz, pastoral team leader here at Waterford Mennonite Church. Thank you for joining us in the privacy of your own home. So before I go any farther, I invite everyone to thumb your nose at me, right now, right where you are. Go ahead! Who's going to see you?... Friends, if we can't smile and laugh through this, it's going to be really rough!

A. Seriously, because I'm preaching to a camera and an empty sanctuary, obviously some huge decisions were made recently by church leaders about holding worship services @ WMC

1. The place we ended up is not at all where I wanted it to be, and not even where I thought we would be only 3 days ago.

a) The conversations & email exchanges that led us here were prompted mostly by a sense of responsibility we felt as church leaders & shepherds for the welfare of this whole flock

b) But these conversations of the past week have felt especially real & especially relevant to have, not just for the sake of our love for the congregation as a whole

2. These decision-making conversations mattered to me also for the sake of my pastoral colleagues Cindy & Katie & Terry.

B. For years now I've felt blessed to be part of a well-functioning pastoral team (& I still feel that way now)

1. But in the past 6 months I've felt a little self-conscious being on a pastoral team where I'm the only one who doesn't have some chronic health condition

2. I'm the only one whose immune system is not compromised in some way.

a) But as my fellow pastors have shared before, these conditions do not define them.

b) And I think you've seen the passions and spiritual gifts that collectively we bring to God's service

3. You see, my pastoral colleagues are the ones who helped bring the urgency of coronavirus home to roost for me.

II. Remember that it was only a week ago when Pastor Terry invited us to some alternative ways of greeting each other?

A. Do you recall the suggestion that instead of handshakes, we do elbow bumps or fist bumps, so we'd be less likely to spread a virus that we might not know we have?

1. 7 days ago?! That feels like 7 months ago!

2. Now fist bumps are no-no's and we're advised to keep 6 feet apart from each other!

B. The ever-evolving story of the novel coronavirus in our country is disorienting!

1. This story can make our heads spin!
 - a) While we're still adjusting to the latest personal event cancellation in the news, then we hear of more cases and more event cancellations!
 - b) The statistics we get are not changing daily, but hourly!
2. As a pastor feeling some responsibility for this worship decision last week, let me describe how my own head was spinning!
3. My thinking last week about what we should do went from ...
 - a) We could still hold our 2 services if people just used common sense and followed the prescribed sanitary practices ... to
 - b) We could have just a single gathered service as long as we urged the older and more vulnerable people to just stay home ... to
 - c) What we're doing now with NO gathered worship services
4. And these major shifts within me came all in just 24 hours!

III. But this constantly changing coronavirus story is not just disorienting ... it threatens to plunge us into a state of fear!

A. At this time of year, some people rightly observe that the NCAA basketball tournaments function like a religion for many Americans ...

1. So if March Madness can be suddenly canceled (just 1 week before it would commandeer thousands of hours and billions of dollars), how can we predict what the practice of Xian faith will look like several months from now?
2. These are times when we really have no idea what to expect, when the stakes seem high, and the impacts personal ...

B. Times like these are when the quiet, insidious wet blanket of fear wraps itself around us

1. And unlike most blankets, this fear blanket doesn't warm us up
2. It actually makes us cold inside ... it makes us calculating, and less compassionate and more inward-focused

C. Folks, I'm not just being theoretical here ... (*illus.*) I felt this for myself just last Thursday:

1. I had come out of a meeting with local Mennonite pastors, which made me much more concerned about coronavirus disruptions

a) I had some errands to do in a short window of free time: Filling the car with gas ...Getting a few simple groceries ... and double checking if any hand sanitizer had miraculously reappeared on the empty store shelves

b) Alas, there was still no hand sanitizer. A little worried that we'd be unprepared at home, I impulsively bought a gallon of bleach, just in case.

(1) Then in the grocery aisles I began thinking of more and more food items we'd need if we were stuck at home for a few weeks.

(2) I felt twinges of anxiety and fear as I walked around the store.

(3) My shopping list was expanding by the minute in my mind! What if we need this? We might run out of that!

2. I had to walk out of the store in order to start reclaiming my right mind and heart!

a) Was I or was I not a believer in the God who delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and who fed them manna in the desert?

b) What was happening to me in the middle of a big box store?

Despite my better judgment about staying calm, trusting in a generous God, and stepping back from popular hysteria, something else was happening inside me:

I didn't like how my heart was feeling colder and my mind getting clouded by the specter of scarcity

I felt like my body was being taken over by an alien being, as if in a science fiction movie!

3. The wet blanket of fear can make us do strange things ... like forgetting the wonderful ways God has already protected and saved us ... like asking, as soon as hardship hits us, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

IV. "Is the LORD among us or not?" –

A. THAT is the question the Israelites ask of Moses when the specter of scarcity looms big for them too

1. Never mind that the LORD God had already responded to their desperate cries as oppressed slaves by actually freeing them from the Egyptian empire ...

2. Never mind that after miraculously getting them out of Egypt, God also miraculously made a way for them across the sea, when it appeared Pharaoh's army was about to massacre them

3. Never mind that God had already saved them from starvation in the wilderness by providing bread from heaven

4. Now here in chapter 17 of Exodus, until God has Moses strike the rock to provide water in the desert, God's people grumble among themselves, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

B. Later on throughout the Bible, Israel's 40-year sojourn in the wilderness is often described as a time of learning ... a time of God testing the character and faithfulness of God's people

1. We could say that God's special people were not just somehow "unlucky" for 40 years ... God did not just decide to "look the other way" for 40 years until they finally came around

2. Instead, the biblical witness portrays the wilderness wanderings as a time of formation for God's people ...

a time of testing their commitment ...

a time of deepening their understandings of what it meant to be in covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob.

V. Could it be that this era of COVID-19 could also be a time for our spiritual formation in the church?

A. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that God directly willed or brought about this terrible disease outbreak in order to somehow "teach Christians a lesson"

1. That is not the spiritual formation parallel I'm making between Israel's 40 years in the wilderness and this global

2. God may find ways for our spiritual formation to arise out of tragedy and suffering, but God does not intentionally hurt people just to see if they will learn something from it

B. Nevertheless, this subject of Christian formation should be fairly fresh in our minds, after we heard eloquently last Sunday from Dr. Rebecca Stoltzfus, President of Goshen College

1. President Stoltzfus said that Christian formation is formation in love, because GOD IS LOVE.

2. One of the most striking lines I remember from her last week is this: "Love is the right kind of contagious" ...

3. She went on to say that the first step in Christian formation is experientially knowing our own belovedness before God

a) This goes beyond just knowing and singing what we were taught as kids, and this morning with the children: "Jesus loves me, this I know"

b) Christian formation starts when we actually feel and experience the unconditional love God lavishes on us

C. In a time of incredible instability in our world, a time of growing fear from a virus that respects neither human life nor international borders ... that ancient Israelite question "Is the LORD among us or not?" is not so hard to understand today.

1. Out of that doubt-filled question can certainly come spiritual growth and formation if we are open to it.
2. In recent weeks I've come across some wise and helpful observations about this coronavirus spread
3. Let me share 3 of these "spiritual formation gold nuggets" in hopes that they may encourage us amid hardships, and as we approach what may be a most unusual Holy Week and Easter:
 - a) We're all in this together, locally as a congregation, and around the world in solidarity with millions of others.
 - b) By not meeting in person, we are sharing among all of us the burdens and the felt losses of community ... this is precisely how we live out being a faith community
 - c) These trials we're experiencing ultimately don't matter, because God will be with us no matter what!

VI. Conclusion

A. Friends, the coronavirus is not hitting us Xians in this part of the world at just a random time: **It's coming to us in the middle of Lent, as we head toward the cross and Easter!**

1. If we claim to be Easter people, living by the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then hardship or community devastation or even death itself cannot & will not have the last word!
 - a) Let us affirm that God will again "strike the rock" for us!
 - b) We believe this because Jesus, the rock of our salvation, has already put death and catastrophes and pandemics in their place!
2. When we feel threatened by the monsters and fears within us and around us let us take comfort from one of my favorite Scripture texts *[read Rom. 8:35-39]*

B. Now I wish to conclude this message with a recorded song that expresses this hope and reassurance ...

1. a song that helps us reclaim our belovedness for the Christian formation that yet lies ahead
2. Please let Lauren Daigle's song "You Say" ... speak to you in whatever way you most need. This will be followed by our reflection question on the screen, pondered in silence